

Combined Action: Vietnam, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM IIA and Beyond?

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Combined Action:
Vietnam, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM IIA and Beyond?
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Submitted by Captain TR Hickman
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Achieving success in counterinsurgency operations involves accomplishing the following tasks:

- Protect the population.
- Establish local political institutions.
- Reinforce local governments.
- Eliminate insurgent capabilities.
- Exploit information from local sources.

-- *FMI 3-07.22, Counterinsurgency Operations*

At the turn of the twentieth century, before U. S. Marines were endeared to the American public by their heroism and bravery during the first and second World Wars, they were involved in counterinsurgency operations from Central and South America to China and the Philippines. Many of the lessons learned from those early experiences were applied during the Vietnam War to the combined action program, one of the few successes of that conflict.¹ During Operation IRAQI FREEDOM IIA, the Marine Corps again found itself involved in counterinsurgency operations and the combined action program was revived. While the combined action program has resulted in tactical success both past and present, the program's ability to contribute to ultimate operational or strategic success depends upon its designation as the main effort—accepting or mitigating the inherent risk, allocating the necessary manpower and equipment, and recognizing the time requirements imposed by the nature of the program itself.

¹ LtCol Raymond C. Damm, Jr., "The Combined Action Program: A Tool for the Future," *Marine Corps Gazette*, October, 1998, 49 and 51.

COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM - VIETNAM

BACKGROUND

The foundation of the combined action program during the Vietnam War was a symbiotic relationship between a squad of Marines, a popular forces (PF)² platoon comprised of 35 soldiers, and the village or hamlet that served as their home. The Marine squad and PF platoon were incorporated into one unit, forming a combined action platoon (CAP).³ According to *Standing Operating Procedure for the 1st Combined Action Group*, the Marine element of the combined action program was assigned the mission "to support Popular Force Platoons, through integrated operations, in carrying out the Popular Force missions and to train the Popular Force soldiers so that they can carry out their mission unaided".⁴ In essence, the CAP was a Marine-trained PF unit whose primary responsibility was security of the village.⁵

² According to W. R. Corson in a paper titled "Marine Combined Action Program in Vietnam," (N.p., n.d. Provided on 21 December 2004 by Marine Corps Historical Association, Washington Navy Yard): "Popular Forces troops---some 150,000 men in 3,000 platoons and 1,700 squads—are stationed in all but one of South Vietnam's 234 districts, defending hamlets and villages, guarding key installations, and providing protection for local officials. The PFs serve under the operational control of the district chiefs. Popular Force members are full-time volunteers, recruited within their native villages and hamlets to protect their own families."

³ 1st Combined Action Group, *Standing Operating Procedure 1st Combined Action Group*, Group Order P3120.1J (Vietnam: Headquarters, 1st Combined Action Group, 18 October 1968), 1-1. Cited hereafter as 1st Combined Action Group, 1968.

⁴ 1st Combined Action Group, 1968, 1-2.

TACTICAL SUCCESS

Beyond the tangible results of combat operations (enemy killed or captured, enemy supplies and equipment recovered or destroyed), several positive effects resulted from the long-term integration, cooperation, and coexistence of Marines and popular forces in CAPs. First, in providing continuous security to a village or hamlet, the CAP prevented insurgents from accessing the population for recruits or supplies.⁶ Next, as the Marines and popular forces trained and operated together, the proficiency of the popular forces improved markedly, with statistically fewer desertions⁷ and improved kill ratios.⁸ In addition, as the CAP became a routine element of the village or hamlet they received more intelligence information than they had resources to act upon.⁹ Finally, though difficult to quantify, the CAP had an impact on the population of a village or hamlet

⁵ Fleet Marine Force Pacific. *The Marine Combined Action Program: Vietnam*. Declassified by the Director of Marine Corps History and Museums. Provided on 21 December 2004 by Marine Corps Historical Association, Washington Navy Yard, 6. Cited hereafter as FMF Pacific, *Marine CAP: Vietnam*.

⁶ LtCol W. R. Corson, USMC, "Marine Combined Action Program in Vietnam," (N.p., n.d. Provided on 21 December 2004 by Marine Corps Historical Association, Washington Navy Yard.), 14-16.

⁷ Corson, 24.

⁸ Robert A. Klyman, *The Combined Action Program: An Alternative Not Taken* (Honors Thesis, Department of History, The University of Michigan, 1986), 8.

⁹ Corson, 19.

in general. According to LtCol W. R. Corson, as a result of the combined action program "the Vietnamese...people have been willing to risk or commit themselves in the defense of their freedom. Their hopes and aspirations have been aroused and the opportunity for democracy to grow has been achieved." ¹⁰

COST

Risk, manpower, and time were among the costs associated with the combined action program in Vietnam. The most obvious cost of the combined action program was the high risk associated with its design. Although CAPs were not manned to combat conventional North Vietnamese Army units, the possibility of such an engagement was likely. This substantial risk was both mitigated and accepted by the leadership at the time.¹¹ The second major cost of the program came in the form of manpower. According to Raymond C. Damm, "until 1969 there was no manpower allocation for the Combined Action Program from Headquarters Marine Corps."¹² Instead, CAPs were manned by personnel from units already on the ground in Vietnam. Finally, time was a significant cost on two distinct levels. On the first level, the program was not meant to achieve instant gratification; by

¹⁰ Corson, 28.

¹¹ Damm, 52.

¹² Damm, 52.

design, each subordinate CAP was a long-term investment, requiring time to mature to its full potential. On the second level, it took nearly five years for the program itself to reach its authorized strength, when it was simultaneously forced to begin reductions accordingly with other Marine units.¹³

ENDSTATE

What began in 1965 as a recommended solution to a small and isolated problem evolved over the course of the next six years into what many still refer to as the only success of the Vietnam War. At its peak in 1969, the combined action program consisted of four groups, twenty company headquarters, and 114 platoons, totaling approximately 1800 American and three thousand Vietnamese personnel.¹⁴ Although, according to David Evans, "statistically, the Marines in the villages suffered half the casualty rate of their counterparts in the big battalions, and the villages were twice as safe....The CAPs remained a token effort involving perhaps 1,500 of the 100,000 Marines in Vietnam."¹⁵ In the words of Raymond C. Damm Jr., "The apex of the program was achieved after the American resolve about Vietnam had plummeted to its nadir."¹⁶ When the last CAP was de-

¹³ Klyman, 16-19.

¹⁴ Klyman, 15.

¹⁵ Evans, 2A.

¹⁶ Damm, 52.

activated on May 17, 1971,¹⁷ none of numerous tactical successes of the combined action program were translated into ultimate operational or strategic victory.

Combined Action Platoons - Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) IIA
BACKGROUND

To prepare the Marines in his division for their return to Iraq, then Major General James N. Mattis, Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, directed that each infantry battalion returning to Iraq stand up a CAP. His intent was "to provide each battalion with an additional capability...one platoon that was more language and culturally oriented than the others."¹⁸ Just as the combined action program of the Vietnam War was adapted from earlier Marine experiences to apply to the specific culture and operational environment of Vietnam, so were the combined action platoons of OIF-IIA adapted from the Vietnam War to apply to the specific culture and operational environment of Iraq.¹⁹ Specifically, General Mattis wanted each battalion commander to have the flexibility to employ his battalion's CAP

¹⁷ Klyman, 20.

¹⁸ Lieutenant General James N. Mattis, USMC, Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, Camp Pendleton, CA, interview by the author, 19 January 2005.

¹⁹ Damm, 51; LtCol P. C. Skuta, USMC, "Introduction to 2/7 Combined Action Program (CAP) Platoon Actions in Iraq," (N.p, n.d., provided on 7 January 2005 by Maj Michael Styskal, Operations Officer, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines.), 1.

when, where, and how it best suited the environment in his unique area of operations.²⁰ As a result, many significant differences exist between each individual OIF-IIA CAP, and even greater differences exist between the CAPs of OIF-IIA and those of the Vietnam War. However, it is the scope and magnitude of their similarities, both positive and negative, which are most important. Although the specific language differs, the three essential tasks assigned to the CAPs of OIF-IIA were to establish security, foster a relationship with and train a designated unit of the Iraqi Security Forces.²¹ Thirty-three years after the last CAP was deactivated in Vietnam, a new breed of CAP stood ready for service in Iraq with a mission nearly identical to that of its predecessor.

²⁰ Mattis.

²¹ 1st Lt Charles E. Anklam, USMC, Platoon Commander, 1st Platoon (Combined Action Platoon), Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Camp Pendleton, CA, telephone interview by the author, 3 January 2005; Capt Matt Danner, USMC, Executive Officer, Weapons Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines (CAP Platoon Commander), Twentynine Palms, CA, interview by author, 14 January, 2005; 1st Lt Jason Goodale and 1st Lt Jon Webre, USMC, "The Combined Action Platoon in Iraq: An Old Technique for a New War," (N.p., n.d. Provided on 4 January 2005 by Maj Michael Styskal, Operations Officer, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines); 1st Lt Carl B. Martinez, USMC, Platoon Commander, 81mm Mortar Platoon (Combined Action Platoon), 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, Camp Pendleton, CA, e-mail interview by author, 10 January, 2005; Maj Kevin Norton, USMC, Operations Officer, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, Twentynine Palms, CA, e-mail interview by author, 5 January, 2005; Skuta, "Introduction," 1; Maj Michael Styskal, USMC, Operations Officer, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Camp Pendleton, CA, e-mail interview by author, 4 January, 2005.

TACTICAL SUCCESS

Like their predecessors, the leadership of the OIF-IIA CAPs believed they were successful.²² They agreed unanimously that they accomplished their assigned mission, and the measures of effectiveness used to validate their claims were nearly identical to those of the Vietnam CAPs.²³ Of the three platoon commanders interviewed, two cited improved proficiency and morale of their Iraqi counterparts as clear indicators of mission accomplishment.²⁴ Others involved with the CAPs cited successful combined operations against insurgents, ability and desire of Iraqi Security Forces to assume training functions for themselves, and quantity of actionable intelligence received from members of the community as measures of effectiveness.²⁵ Unfortunately, these successes did not come without significant cost.

COST

Not surprisingly, the most frequently cited costs associated with OIF-IIA CAPs paralleled those of the Vietnam CAPs. Once again, risk, manpower, and time were highest among them. First, the military risks associated with CAPs during

²² Mattis.

²³ Anklam and others.

²⁴ Anklam, Danner.

²⁵ Anklam and others.

OIF-IIA were just as high as they were during the Vietnam War. Clearly an important consideration "because of the potential of catastrophic loss," General Mattis "approved any use of CAP" during OIF-IIA.²⁶ In addition, during OIF-IIA, as during much of Vietnam, the manpower and equipment that constituted each CAP came from already deployed battalions without increasing their strength or decreasing their area of operations or assigned missions.²⁷ Another notable cost of the OIF-IIA CAPs was time. Unlike the Vietnam era when individual Marines rotated in and out of units already in Vietnam, entire battalions rotated into and out of Iraq for OIF-IIA. With those battalions went the CAPs of OIF-IIA. As a result, each CAP had, at best, six months to accomplish its mission, which included fostering a relationship with an Iraqi counterpart as a mission essential task.

?ENDSTATE?

The question is not whether or not the combined action concept will produce positive results at the tactical level - it has proven to do so, even if on a limited scale, during two separate modern conflicts. The question that remains: Is the concept of combined action the main effort or a supporting

²⁶ Mattis.

effort? Even under very different circumstances, with specialized adaptation to unique situations and cultures, the overarching limitation of combined action to have operational or strategic effects lies in its method of employment. Until it becomes the main effort and the associated costs of risk, manpower, and time are mitigated, allocated, and understood, combined action can only continue to make positive contributions on the tactical level of war.

²⁷ LtCol P. C. Skuta, USMC, "Partnering with the Iraqi Security Forces" (N.p, n.d., provided on 7 January 2005 by Maj Michael Styskal, Operations Officer, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines.), 5-7.

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THOUGHTS

Insurgents are true maneuverists. They will find the gap every time. If CAP is employed only by 1 service or in 1 sector and is not a coordinated effort, the result will be minimal b/c the insurgents will bypass them. The American people are less willing to accept casualties AND the leadership is more cautious in avoiding a repeat of the Vietnam experience. However, not without significant cost. What is the answer? Whatever the answer, it requires many aspects that CAP offers as part of itself.

LEFTOVERS

"Popular Forces units, generally not regarded as highly efficient, are converted, by a modest investment of Marines, into useful and productive entities, which serve to free Marine units for other employment."²⁸

"CAPs in operation longer than six months are surfeited with intelligence information, in most cases the CAP because of time, space and available resources usually has more intelligence information than they can exploit."²⁹

"There were some uncomfortable military risks to these small unit outposts. The CAPs were not meant to withstand NVA regular forces or large main force guerrilla units and would not last long if assaulted by either. It was a risk Gen Walt was willing to accept."³⁰

"the Combined Action Program expanded to its authorized strength of 4 groups, 20 company headquarters, and 114

²⁸ FMF Pacific, *Marine CAP: Vietnam*, .

²⁹ Corson, 19.

³⁰ Damm, 52.

platoons...Manpower levels now stood at 1,710 USMC, 119 USN, and 2,991 PF personnel."³¹

PEAK - Tot US Troops April 1969, 543,400³².

"The CAP specifically avoids initiating civic action projects, with the exception of MEDCAPs, until the credibility of their military security efforts has been accomplished."³³

105. Missions

1. The stated missions of the Popular Forces are as follows:

- (a) Destroy the VC³⁴ infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility.
- (b) Provide public security and help maintain law and order.
- (c) Protect the friendly political structure.
- (d) Protect bases and communication axes within the villages and hamlets.
- (e) Organize local intelligence nets.
- (f) Participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the VC.

2. The mission of the Marine element of the Combined Action Program is to support Popular Force Platoons, through integrated operations, in carrying out the Popular Force missions and to train the Popular Force soldiers so that they can carry out their mission unaided.

106. Tasks. Appropriate tasks in support of these missions include but are not limited to the following:

- 1. Motivate, instill pride, patriotism and aggressiveness in the PF soldier.

³¹ Klyman, 15.

³² "Vietnam Milestones," The Washington Post, 6 February 1990, z.15.

³³ Corson, 19.

³⁴ According to "Viet Cong," Wikipedia, 2005, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viet_Cong> (9 January, 2005): "Viet Cong (Việt Cộng) was a name used by South Vietnamese and allied soldiers in Vietnam...to refer to the armed insurgents and political dissidents fighting against the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War."

2. Conduct combined/coordinated day and night patrols and ambushes in assigned areas.

3. Conduct training in general military subjects, leadership and language...to increase the proficiency of PF elements so that Marine elements may ultimately be withdrawn and PF elements will continue to perform in an effective manner.³⁵

"The guerrilla must have either the active or passive support of the populace to succeed....Therefore, one of the prime considerations for the counterguerrilla force is to gain and maintain the support of the populace."³⁶

"Each infantry battalion deploying to OIF-IIA was required to have a CAP platoon."³⁷ [...resulting in a total number of X Combined Action Platoons in existence between February and September 2004, representing approximately Y percent of the total Marine Corps forces employed]

In order to accomplish the ultimate purpose of winning the popular support of the Vietnamese people,

....Commanding officers would sometimes volunteer substandard men because they did not want to give up their best, most experienced Marines or put up with the personnel shortage that resulted.

³⁵ 1st Combined Action Group, 1968, 1-2.

³⁶ U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Reference Publication (MCRP) 3-33A, *Counterguerilla Operations*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1986), 2-6.

³⁷ Skuta, 1.